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CONTINUING

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THE greatest of all subjects is at present the subject of study throughout the Christian world. It is an occasion of general satisfaction that the arrangement of the International Sunday School Lessons permits an entire year to be devoted to a single subject,—*the Life of the Christ*. The possibility of gaining a comprehensive knowledge of the subject will incite many a student to do a piece of work which has not been possible in ordinary Sunday School work. The new material which has appeared as a result of fresh investigation and deeper research into the documents, and the better knowledge which we now possess of the times of Jesus, make it possible for those who are more scholarly inclined to study the subject as they have never before studied it. There seems good reason for us to suppose not only that the world at large will possess at the end of these twelve months a better conception of the life of Christ than has ever yet existed, but also that much new material will be contributed, on the basis of which it will be possible to arrive at conclusions more nearly true than any that have yet been reached. Work upon the subject might loosely be classified under the heads: The foreshadowings of the Christ; the times in which he lived, and the circumstances under which he did his work; the history of his life; his teachings; the life and teachings of Jesus, com-

pared with those of the representatives of other religions. At this time we may consider suggestions relating to the foreshadowings of the Christ.

THE same interest in the Old Testament predictions of the Messiah is not manifested by all of the New Testament writers. Some refer very sparingly to these anticipations of a Messianic kingdom; others seem to make them the foundation of their entire work. Of the four gospel writers, Matthew, for obvious reasons, deals most largely with this material. Again and again in particular events of the Savior's life, the evangelist sees the fulfillment of a prophecy of old. It makes some difference, of course, whether the event happened *in order that* the prophecy might be fulfilled, or *as an illustration* of the principle underlying the prophetic statement. The rigid interpretation of the conjunction, commonly translated, "in order that," would unquestionably furnish us a life of Jesus so mechanical and artificial as to seem to have been arranged simply to fill out a programme which had been prepared beforehand. Such a conception is very wide of the mark. God, acting in the history of a chosen people, revealing to them from time to time his will, dealing with them through all the centuries as a mediatory people, shapes this history in such a manner as that it anticipates in many particulars the principles, and indeed the events connected with the life of the Christ, through whom this great work, begun in Israel, was to be finished. From this point of view it is therefore not a strange thing to find analogies between the life of the Christ and the work of the prophets and kings who were raised up by God to do for their generations, in a small way, the work which, in the fullness of time, he was to accomplish for the world and for all ages. Injustice is done to the fundamental connection between the history of Israel and that of the Christ if one satisfies himself with comparing superficially a few events scattered here and there. It is true that when, on Palm Sunday, Jesus rode into Jerusalem upon an ass, it was done in accordance with the statement of the evangelist in fulfillment of the words of Zechariah. But an examination of the original passage¹ shows

¹ Zech. 9:9, 10.

that the prophet is describing the Messianic kingdom as a kingdom of peace; one whose king will ride upon an ass, the animal of peace, rather than upon a horse. It will be a time when the chariot and the battle bow shall be cut off. The king shall speak peace unto the nations, and his dominions shall be from sea to sea. The idea of peace was the thought sought to be conveyed by the words of the prophet; this was to be the distinctive and characteristic of the Messianic reign. But if Jesus had not ridden into Jerusalem in the manner described the prophecy would have been as truly fulfilled. The principle underlying the prophecy and the New Testament event was one and the same; and it is in this underlying principle that the passages found their harmony, rather than in the coincidence between the historical event and the poetical description of the prophet.

It is common to speak of the development of the divine revelation, and to represent it as having taken place gradually. This is a true representation. To each succeeding century there was made an addition to the truth which had been revealed concerning the deliverance which was to be worked out by God for humanity and through humanity. With the most liberal interpretation we may not ascribe to Moses many ideas concerning the future kingdom which can be called definite or distinct. They are, for the most part, still general. At the time of his death the line through which this deliverance was to be wrought out had been narrowed from humanity at large, with which it began, through Noah, Shem, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to the tribe of Judah. The land which is to be the scene of redemption, Palestine, has been selected and is ready to be occupied. The means through which all this is to be accomplished had been indicated in outline. First of all a nation has been chosen and assigned an inheritance to which the territories of other nations are accommodated. This nation is taught that it is to serve as a priestly nation between God and the other nations of the world. It is taught also that it has a prophetic and royal function among other nations. Provision has at this time been made for the priestly order, the prophetic order, and the royal order

through which these ideas may be more distinctly represented. A conservative estimate of the material would find at the death of Moses the basis laid for the more particular work which was to follow. But when we think of the centuries that have passed from the creation of man to the death of Moses, we must concede that the existence of this minimum of Messianic truth shows the revelation to have been a very gradual one. The progress made during the next seven or eight centuries is also gradual, and when we collect the prophetic statements of all periods, and, having interpreted them according to their historical connection, realize how slight, after all, the anticipation was as compared with the reality when it had once presented itself, we are more than ever impressed with the fact that the preparation for the coming of the Messiah was above all things gradual.

It is interesting to note also that in this long period there were intervals of considerable duration in which no message of any kind was spoken. If, with the more conservative scholarship, we assign the essential idea of "the first gospel"¹ to the earliest period, there is a great gap between this utterance, whatever may have been its source, and the next. If, likewise, we assign the essential ideas of the patriarchal blessings to the period of the patriarchs themselves, there is another long protracted interval between these statements and those which are connected with the organization of the nation after its departure from Egypt. No one has ever discovered anything of a Messianic character in the Book of Judges. This, however, is explained by the narrative itself,² which tells us that the "word of the Lord was rare in those days." Unless we assign Psalms 2 and 45 to the period of Solomon no Messianic statement may be traced to his times. There is naturally occasion for surprise that Elijah and Elisha and Jonah make no reference to the ideal kingdom or in its characteristics. There are other prophets likewise whose writings have come down to us in which it is difficult to find anything which may be interpreted as Messianic.

¹ Gen. 3 : 14, 15.

² Sam. 3 : 1.

With this doctrine, as with others, certain periods were especially suited for its development. At certain times the minds of the people were lifted up to this great ideal, at others they had entirely lost sight of it.

To those who read these old predictions with the full light of the history, they may seem to be clear and definite. That, however, there was great indefiniteness may be assumed to be true. The fact that the ideas were revealed one by one meant in itself ambiguity and indefiniteness. Perhaps no better figure can be employed to express this than the comparison of the first rays of the morning sun with its brightness at high noon. The Old Testament times were in the times of early dawn ; rays here and there were shooting forth. With each succeeding century the brightness increased and darkness was dispelled until the coming of the Christ when the sun in all its glory shone forth. An effort to find in the earliest prophetic statements the fully developed ideas of the New Testament itself, for example, the double nature of the Christ, from the point of view of a sound exegesis, must fail. Prophecy in its very nature is indefinite, and in general it is true that the more definite it seems to be, the more suspicious is its authenticity. Some minds, to be sure, find difficulty in satisfying themselves with that which is not perfectly clear. Such an attitude of mind, however, bespeaks lack of experience in scholarly work.

It is also worthy of note that at particular times the Messianic thought is given particular coloring. It is in the period of the United Kingdom that the conception of the Messiah as king and his dominion as a kingdom presents itself most strongly. How natural indeed that those who lived in the period when the kingdom was uppermost in the thoughts of men should describe this ideal thing of the future under the form of a kingdom. It is in the period of the Babylonian captivity, when the Israel which still remained faithful to Jehovah though deprived of temple and city and home, though forsaken even by God himself, though suffering indescribable suffering,—it is in this period that

the conception of the suffering Messiah is most prominent. And so it could be shown that the main thought from one century to another is colored by the circumstances of the times in which the thought is presented. This is entirely consistent with the idea that the history of Israel is an especially ordered history in connection with which great truths of revelation were to be disclosed.

BUT no one who studies historically the development of the various ideas which together make up the Messianic idea has failed to note that, after all, in spite of intervals and indefiniteness and local coloring, there is to be traced a regular and steady growth. The ideal placed before the minds of Israel by the greatest of the prophets, Moses, is never lowered, but steadily lifted with every step taken in the progress of history ; and one standing at the time when prophecy has ceased to be, before the fulfillment has yet appeared, loses sight of the gaps and local coloring, and sees only the unity which has characterized it all, the strength which it exhibits and the sublimity which it has attained.

THE most interesting of all is the uniqueness of this foreshadowing of the Christ. There being no such person as the Christ in the history of other ancient nations, there could be no actual foreshadowing of such an one in the literatures of these nations. And yet one would think that poets might have dreamed of such a kingdom even if it were never to be realized by those to whom they sang their dreams. Not so. Israel's literature stands alone among the sacred literatures of the world in presenting these wonderful anticipations of the new kingdom, a kingdom not made with hands. If no other evidence could be presented for the divine element in the Old Testament Scriptures, this would be sufficient. There is no exegesis which can throw out of these scriptures this strange and controlling element. The Messianic thought consists of a thousand threads which are interwoven with the history of Israel. In the union of these threads we find the unity and the conception of a new order of things, a new covenant, a new kingdom.